

2,000 MPH JET—

A SECRET SINCE 1959

SHORTLY AFTER DAWN, the B-29 bomber took off from an air base hidden by California desert. Beneath it was slung the X-1, a needle-nosed craft that resembled the big "block-buster" bombs of World War II. It was Oct. 17, 1947, and that day Air Force Capt. Chuck Yeager became the first human to hurl an airplane through the then-mysterious sound barrier. Since then, supersonic flight has become routine. But only research craft such as the rocket-powered X-15 have been able to exceed Mach 2.2 for more than a few seconds. Mach 2.2 is the "aluminum barrier," the point at which aluminum begins to melt. Now, for the first time, a jet-powered, production fighter may be able to speed through it at will.

By Laurence Barrett
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WASHINGTON.

President Johnson announced yesterday that the United States has developed an interceptor-type jet warplane whose "performance far exceeds that of any other aircraft in the world today." He identified it as the A-11.

The dramatic revelation of one of the best-held military secrets in recent years set off considerable speculation and confusion. The Air Force, as recently as a month ago, pleaded with Congress for funds to develop an "improved manned interceptor." The attributes of the plane sought by the Air Force were similar to the ones mentioned by Mr. Johnson yesterday—high speed, long range and great altitude capability.

The House voted authorization—\$40 million—for the interceptor, but the Senate voted nothing. Mr. Johnson said the Air Force had been working on the project since 1959. Some members of Congress were kept informed of the work.

Inevitably, the question arose yesterday as to why the Air Force made a public and private fight for something it already had in the works. Also curious was the fact that Congress should haggle over something already well along.

Among the possible explanations are these:

¶ The A-11 might have been developed as a follow-on for the U-2 spy plane, but now Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara wants to use it—or a variation of it—as a fighter. For some technological reason, perhaps, the Air Force is not persuaded this is wise.

¶ The entire controversy over the improved manned

interceptor could have been a ruse to hide from the Russians the extent of American progress warplane design.

¶ The Administration might wish to deflect criticism—particularly from Sen. Barry Goldwater—that it is falling to keep up with military requirements for modern aircraft.

No one in Washington would discuss these matters yesterday. Even the designation of A-11 caused some uncertainty. In military usage, the letter "A" as a rule identifies Navy attack fighters. Yet this was an Air Force project.

Lockheed built both the U-2 and the A-11 at Burbank, Calif. There was speculation that Clarence "Kelly" Johnson of Lockheed, who supervised design of the U-2, was

development of the A-11. The U-2 can achieve great altitude—reportedly better than 90,000 feet, but is relatively slow. Mr. Johnson said the A-11 "has been tested in sustained flight at more than 2000 miles an hour and at altitudes in excess of 70,000 feet." This would make the A-11 at least four times faster than the U-2 and at least 500 miles an hour faster than any American fighter now in the air.

Observers could remember no other major military development in recent years that was kept entirely secret besides the U-2 itself.

It was considered significant that work on the A-11 started in 1959—the year before the U-2 flown by Francis Gary Powers crashed in Russia. This suggested to some a possible reason for keeping the A-11 project secret for so long, and for seeking other uses for the plane.

Government sources acknowledged that the A-11 had reconnaissance capabilities.

The President said he was making the announcement yesterday "to permit the orderly exploitation of this advanced technology in our military and commercial planes." The use of titanium in the A-11 may aid in the development of a supersonic transport. The metal, which poses great problems for aircraft engineers, is necessary for planes traveling at excessive speeds.

President Johnson said "several" A-11 aircraft now were being flight-tested at Edwards Air Force Base, Calif., "to determine their capabilities as long-range interceptors." Further details of design and performance were not disclosed for security reasons, yet photographs were released. They showed the plane to be extremely long and thin in its forward portion. Short wings are near the tail assembly.

The Federal Aviation Agency and those private companies in competition to build a supersonic transport have been kept informed of progress on the A-11, government sources reported.

However, they emphasized that the A-11 cannot be transformed into a bomber or commercial transport. The latter still require separate, major development programs.

On the other hand, experience Lockheed is gaining with the A-11 may give the company an important leg up in the current competition to design and build a Mach 3 supersonic transport. More than a billion dollars are to be spent in this effort to perfect a plane that can carry passengers between New York and London in about two hours.